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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KABUL 000942

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SUBJECT: PRT HERAT - HERAT'S ASHURA RIOTS: THE HEAVY HAND
OF ISMAIL KHAN

Classified By: A/DCM ROSEMARY HANSEN FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On the surface, the February 9-10 Sunni-Shia riots in Herat were a seamless transition from a "spontaneous" February 7 protest against the Prophet Mohammed caricatures. We believe, however, the riots were in part the result of political connivance by Energy Minister and former Herat Governor Ismail Khan (IK) to weaken sitting Governor Anwari and, ultimately, to replace him. Although Gov. Anwari's rather inept response may have clouded his future, there was no groundswell of support for IK's return as governor. Moreover, assertions of Iranian involvement appear unfounded. The riots also laid bare shortcomings of the police in Herat, including lack of training and equipment to deal with civil unrest. END SUMMARY.

Chronology

¶2. (U) Herat's protest marches over the Danish cartoons of Mohammed began Tuesday morning, February 17. Previously, there had been no outward indication in Herat of the rage that had gripped other parts of the country. Although raucous and violent in comparison with previous Herat demonstrations, the protestors, estimated at between 1,000 and 2,000, were relatively passive compared with rioters elsewhere in Afghanistan. Few windows at the Italian PRT and the former German Consulate were smashed, and there were few injuries.

¶3. (C) Thursday February 9 was Ashura and Shiites began their processions at 0900. Rumors, likely seeded by 'night letters' denouncing Shiites and Hazaras (one and the same in the mind of many

Heratis), quickly spread that the Shiites were planning to perform their ritual self-flagellations at Herat's Blue Mosque, an important Sunni religious site. These rumors seemed validated in the minds of many Sunnis when Herat Governor Anwari, a Hazara, delivered a speech commemorating Ashura at the Blue Mosque. (Note: The Governor of Herat traditionally makes a speech at the Blue Mosque commemorating Ashura, though it may be taken differently when a Shia Governor makes the speech. End Note.) At 0930, Sunni marchers, armed with bats and wearing headbands that read "Fedayeen e Hazrat e Omar," ("We dedicate ourselves to the second caliph Omar") began a countermarch. The two groups clashed, and up to six were killed. Sunni sources claim over 150 Sunnis were hurt, while only a few Shiites were wounded - proof, they assert, that the Shiites were the aggressors. Shiites with whom we spoke countered that their many injured were prevented by Sunni thugs from entering Herat Hospital and had to be taken to private homes; thus the undercount in official Shia wounded. Energy Minister Ismail Khan, with the approval of President Karzai, arrived in Herat late on the 9th.

14. (SBU) Tensions remained high on Friday, February 10, with youths on motorbikes provoking clashes with security forces. Unofficial Sunni checkpoints at city chokepoints harassed Shiite travelers. However, sufficient force had been brought into the city to restore order by the afternoon.

KABUL 00000942 002 OF 004

Iran's Hidden Hand?

15. (C) Although almost every interlocutor with whom we spoke alleged Iranian involvement in Herat's cartoon and Ashura riots, we saw little direct evidence that Iran had a role in either. All sides appeared to be telling us what they assumed we wanted to hear regarding Iran's role: Iranian agents and sympathizers in Herat likely helped incite the cartoon protests as an anti-Western (i.e., anti-American) opportunity too good to pass up; Iranian economic and political influence in Western Afghanistan was extensive; and the GOI was quite capable of instigating mayhem in Herat if it so desired. The Chief of Security for Vice President Khalili, himself a Shia Hazara, believes that the Iranians would have no problem selling out Afghan Shiites, especially Hazaras, if it would benefit Tehran's goals in Afghanistan. (Comment: It is doubtful, however, whether Iran would intentionally encourage Sunni-Shia violence, as evidenced during Ashura, placing minority Shiites/Hazaras in greater peril. Even before the recent violence, local Sunnis have constantly accused Hazaras of being Iranian agents, and, with the approval and assistance of Governor Anwari, of occupying Sunni land. Herat's Hazara population remains acutely aware of the constant threat from the province's majority Sunnis, and it is unlikely Iran would intentionally place them in harm's way with the Sunnis. End Comment.)

Ismail Khan's Not So Hidden Hand

16. (C) Whereas proof of Iran's alleged involvement remains elusive, the fingerprints of Ismail Khan (IK) are much more apparent in the Ashura riots. IK has long been Herat's dominant figure - and, given his antagonism towards incumbent Governor Anwari, he may have perceived he had much to gain in destabilizing

Herat at Anwari's expense. Although many suggest IK has further ambitions, including the Presidency, Herat is his power base, and, in some ways, his sources of funds and his supporters are under siege. International efforts to reform Herat customs - through eliminating corruption, IK's principal source of revenue - are taking shape. DIAG, with Herat as a high priority target province, may also be beginning to nip at IK's armed loyalists. If IK was to retain his influence in Kabul, he needed to control Herat - and act promptly.

17. (C) The circumstantial evidence of IK's premeditated involvement in the Ashura riots is compelling. Banners carried by protesters changed the moment IK landed in Herat, from religious slogans to political ones, e.g., "Down with Anwari, long live IK." Despite the short time between the initial anti-cartoon protests and the sectarian clashes, the Sunni protestors were well prepared with sharpened sticks, the Omar headbands, and night letters. Organizationally, the IK machine is quite capable of mobilizing its loyalists on short notice. Even when the clashes had either burned out or had been suppressed by security forces, masses of youths on motorbikes roamed the city with large pro-IK banners and continued low level running battles with police. Finally, an IK confidant, after some prodding,

KABUL 00000942 003 OF 004

acknowledged that headbands and banners honoring Omar were made in advance of Ashura, and that marches commemorating Omar had been planned days prior.

Governor Anwari: Outfoxed by the Grey Fox

18. (C) Failing completely to recognize Herat's combustible environment before Ashura, Governor Anwari was caught flat-footed. Security forces were not prepositioned and thus unprepared to respond quickly to civil unrest. (Herat Police Chief General Ayoub Salangi did not cover himself with glory as his forces exhibited a marked lack of professionalism and leadership.) The police forces had no proper crowd control equipment and often responded to marchers by firing full clips of live rounds into the air. Security forces that arrived later, including the ANA, Afghan Border Police, and police cadets, proved more effective than the early ANP responders.

19. (C) After the situation had calmed considerably, Mullah Hussein, an IK supporter, was arrested for his involvement in inciting the violence. Shortly before his departure back to Kabul, IK demanded Anwari release Hussein and Mullah Mustafa, another IK sympathizer arrested in December. IK accused Anwari of favoring Hazaras, a well used canard against the Governor, and lacking the qualifications and ability to govern Herat. Anwari acceded to IK's demands and released both men.

10. (C) As a Shia Hazara and a non-Herati, the Governor already suffered from a weak mandate to lead. His handling of the Ashura riots will further weaken his position and he has not denied attempting to resign as Governor. President Karzai's decision to let IK return to Herat when the full blown violence erupted, not allowing local authorities to quell the unrest themselves, may turn out to be the last nail in Anwari's coffin.

Conclusion and Comment

¶11. (C) Herat's February 9-10 Ashura clashes were not accidental, and, given the premeditated aspects, were less sectarian than politically motivated. Some believe Ismail Khan and his lieutenants planned and carried them out, capitalizing on heightened tensions due to the perfect storm of the (unrelated) cartoon protests, Ashura, and warmer weather. By whipping up Sunni emotions, channeling anger at perceived Shia slights, demonizing the Hazara (personified most obviously by the Hazara Governor), and playing the role of savior, IK may have strengthened his hand in Herat. In the end, however, IK did not appear to achieve all his goals. True, he outmaneuvered Anwari to the point where Karzai may have to appoint a new governor, although he will likely wait several weeks or months in order not to be perceived as giving in to the rioters. But IK failed to unite Herat behind him, and there has been no widespread clamor for his return to the Governor's Palace.

¶12. (C) The behavior of the ANP was noteworthy. They had no riot gear and depended on their weapons to control the crowds. Their lack of proper equipment

KABUL 00000942 004 OF 004

and tactical crowd control skills was obvious, even though some were graduates of the Regional Training Center. The Border Police, on the other hand, earned kudos, even from detractors of Colonel Ayub, 6th Brigade Commander. The ANA also received a passing grade, although the delay in their deployment was frequently commented on here.
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